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AUTHOR Jones, Johnny L.
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ABSTRACT

Schools can no longer be responsible for only the cognitive domain of the child. They must also expand to include the affective domain. When it comes to the corporal punishment or discipline of a disruptive black child, the child's cultural history and history of alienation must be considered. And, because it is the teacher who controls rewards and punishments, attention must also be given to the student-teacher subsystem within a school. Although it can be argued that it is the responsibility of the total community, and the black community in particular, to develop disciplined behavior among its youth, schools must also develop the black child's sense of identity and his self-image. This can be accomplished by parental/community involvement in school systems. For black children, any kind of alternative to corporal punishment is desirable, but for these to work completely, the parents must recognize their responsibility. If the process of discipline has been established for the child by the time he enters school, then the role of the school with regard to discipline can be realistically interpreted, assumed and applied in its proper context. (Author/EB)

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BLACK FAMILIES: A SOURCE OF NATIONAL STRENGTH

"CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, DISCIPLINE AND CULTURAL
DIFFERENCES AND EXPECTATIONS"

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Dr. Johnny L. Jones
Superintendent of Schools
Dade County Public Schools
1410 N. E. Second Avenue
Miami, Florida 33132

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CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, DISCIPLINE AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

More often than not, I am asked by black parents: "How do you rear a black child to have a positive self-concept or high self-esteem in today's society?" Such an overriding concern ought to lead us to a reflection on the body of literature concerning personality development and the educational and social functioning of the black child. I contend that we cannot think of our children without thinking about the value systems of our families. Furthermore, we cannot think about black children, black families, and black communities without, simultaneously, realizing that this entire configuration of black culture and its attendant differences, uniqueness and expectations are conditioned by other cultures, mainly the white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon society.

I would suggest two other realizations which occur with great impact: (1) the essentially negative nature of research on the matter and (2) the extent to which black children are separated from their families and communities even at the conceptual basis alone, not to mention the real, physical alienation from each other. The most glaring factor in the above analysis zeroes in on the separation of the black community from the surrounding white community. It is far too obvious that we who have deep concerns about black children and their educational future must think about them in relation to black families and the black community, never becoming oblivious of the fact that this entire configuration is embedded in a society which devalues everything black.

We realize, of course, that in the decade of the 60s significant events have occurred in the lives of black Americans. The civil rights movement of the last decade facilitated the genesis of a new breed of black youth. As the civil rights movement paved the way to the forceful thrust of the rise of black consciousness, with its demands for freedom and self-determination, still another kind of young black youth was born. During this transition a large literature concerning black identity emerged. The bulk of this literature does not reflect significant changes in psycho-social attributes of blacks. It would seem that such changes would be a necessary ingredient of the new stance being assumed by blacks vis-a-vis the white society. This seeming dichotomy may be explained by reference to both theoretical and methodological shortcomings in the field of research.

But the most salient factor that must be underscored in this veritable renaissance of the black culture is contained in the following question: "If the behavioral changes occurring in blacks, especially young black children, during the past decade represent a positive change in self-concept, self-identity, and other areas, what factors made such a change possible?" In other words, is it possible for a black child to develop a positive self-concept in this society, and if so, what are the contributing factors?

The quest for self-identity is, indeed, a search for answers to the questions: Who am I? What am I like as a person? Where do I fit in the world? The answers the individual black child arrives at are inextricably

intertwined with how others see and interact with him. Leading authorities, among them Erik Erikson, agree that the self-concept arises through the individual's interaction with other members of society -- parents, peers, teachers, and other representatives of society's institutions. The individual child's sense of self is developed, molded, and controlled by his assuming the attitudes and definitions of others toward him. Thus, the extent to which an individual black child is a member of this society, its values, goals, attitudes, and norms are his. Even though each self has its unique characteristics, it is structured in terms of these societal attributes, and is, thus, also an individual reflection of the social process.

Moreover, regardless of whether the concept is considered from a socio-psychology or from a dynamic psychology frame of reference, the nature of the child's social context is of primary significance for the development of the self-concept.

A basic implication of this perspective is the necessity for redefinition, redirection if you will, of educational programs to include a total developmental approach that is conditioned by that black child's cultural differences and expectations. In other words, every aspect of the child's environment and living experiences must be considered in the educational process. Thus, the school is recognized as a part of the child's community and as such plays a mediating role between the child and parent, on the one hand, and the larger society, on the other. Its effects in this role may be

largely positive or negative for the child's self-concept. Thus the school can no longer afford to define its responsibilities to involve only the cognitive domain of the child; it must expand the concept of objectives to include also the affective domain, and especially the self-concept, because it appears that its status has implications for other significant areas of human functioning: e.g., achievement motivation, aspiration levels, expectancy, fate control, and so forth.

If the foregoing is accepted, then it follows that the classroom as a subsystem of the school, and the various subsystems within the classroom, are significant focal points. The classroom environment should be such that it facilitates joy in working and learning.

The student-teacher subsystem is also critical. Because the teacher controls reinforcement (rewards and punishments), he/she plays a "shaping" role with students. Thus, the teacher values assume a paramount role in interaction with students. So long as the society places differential value on characteristics such as hair texture and skin color, the fit, with respect to these dimensions, between teacher and child will be critical.

By and large, black children are threatened with the specter of white cultural alienation from the cradle to the grave. Yet many escape the worst features of oppression and racism, and many have shown an incredible capacity to survive, achieve, and, sadly enough, conform in the face of impossible odds. Nevertheless, all blacks are members of

a color caste system in this society and are subjected to ruthless oppression. We need to know more about the oppressor -his self-concept, factors in its development and maintenance, and the like.

Paraphrasing Essien-Udom in his 1962 Research on Black Children, the tragedy of blacks in America is that they have rejected their origins, i.e., the essentially human meaning implicit in the heritage of slavery, prolonged suffering, and social rejection. By rejecting their unique group experience and favoring assimilation and even biological amalgamation, they thus deny themselves the creative possibilities inherent in it and in their folk culture. This dilemma, I would suggest, is fundamental; it severely limits the ability to evolve a new identity or a meaningful synthesis, capable of endowing their lives with meaning and purpose.

Common to the black ethnic group is the social-psychological element of a special sense of both ancestral and future-oriented identification with the group. These are the "people" of my ancestors, therefore, they are my people, and will be the people of my children and their children. With members of other groups I may share political participation, occupational relationships, common civic enterprise, perhaps even an occasional warm friendship, but in a very special way, which history has decreed, I share a sense of indissoluble and intimate identity with this group and not that group within the larger society and the world. (cfr. Milton Gordon's Assimilation in American Life - 1974)

It is against this backdrop that I now come to discuss corporal punishment and discipline in the schools. And the question that challenges us right here and now is: "How can the schools, the teachers that teach in those schools, and the administrators that run those schools and their many and varied programs, deal with corporal punishment and discipline for the disruptive black child?" To be sure, teachers and administrators have invested years of their lives in preparing for the teaching profession because they have a communal commitment to serve the children. All too often they have been traditionally blamed for the failure of the schools.

I would grant that it is the responsibility of the total community, the black community to be exact, to develop disciplined behavior among the youth. A society that structures a school system that produces discipline problems must be held accountable for the consequences and the solution. Seldom has society focused upon the root causes of discipline problems, which often prevent school administrators and teachers from fulfilling their commitment and their responsibility.

Needless to say, the purpose of discipline in the schools must be kept foremost, or else random gimmicks and spurious panaceas will produce results inconsistent with the purpose. The major aims of school discipline, I shall propose, are: (1) to provide an atmosphere conducive to educational success for all students; (2) to produce citizens competent to participate in a changing democratic society; and (3) to develop socially responsible individuals. I contend that all

discipline -preventive, supportive, and remedial- must further these aims.

There are sociological causes that are characteristic of youth cultures in an urban setting within a discriminatory and exploitive society which conditions the learning environments, i.e. the schools, in which black children experience the climate of alienation from society which result in their aimless, hopeless, and frustrating affective and cognitive growth.

For the blacks this alienation involves a distrust of the school establishment, of its school administrators and teachers which presumably are symbolic allies of hostile forces in the community. Accompanying this climate is the growth of street gangs in innercity environs which bring hostilities, fears, and division into the schools. The mass media , with their escapist content, tend further to influence negatively the children's readiness on a social plane. Our children, by and large, are being conditioned by constant exposure to identify with persons who are not perceived to have any social responsibility.

As a strong proponent of parental/community involvement in the conduct of school systems, a working partnership between school and home is essential to a child's security and to his/her optimum development as a socially responsible individual. Between the school and the home there must be a fundamental consensus upon which cooperative structures can be built. Parents, I believe, are usually the most significant people

in the lives of children. Greater understanding and trust between school and home can be achieved only through much constructive contact.

As the pupil matures, he/she, too, should become a recognized partner in this alliance for his/her benefit. In the long run, the emergence of common goals for the school and the home must also be strengthened through the contact that is made in common undertakings for the good of the school and the community in which each person and group will contribute a particular specialized knowledge and ability, in which mutual needs can be met and mutual loyalty develop. Parents, educational personnel, and students, to the extent of their maturity, must find ways of planning together for their own schools. In such situations, parents will come to recognize the limitations imposed upon teachers both by social and political structure; teachers will become better informed about the needs and the resources of the community and more effectively involved with their charges as whole persons.

Schools, too, must develop, cherish, and, in some situations, initiate the black child's sense of identity and self-image. This oftentimes involves person-to-person relationships of courtesy, dignity, and respect, learning activities that recognize the black children as worthy components of society, cultural experiences that dignify the achievements of their adult models.

Urban schools especially seem to have more than their share of discipline problems. But is the problem the student's or the teacher's?

Even with outrageous instances regarding cases of corporal punishment (for example, in Dallas, there were 5,358 cases of corporal punishment reported in 1971), the majority of the citizenry seem to back the administrator's view of allowing corporal punishment. However, due to recent judicial rulings, "... including one by a Federal district judge in Boston flatly banning corporal punishment, the city's paddling policy could well be overturned in court."

The American Civil Liberties Union, who urged that federal monies be withheld from systems that endorsed corporal punishment admits that many parents and neighborhood organizations accept, or at least condone, the exercise. "There are large number of people in this country who feel that this kind of discipline is very necessary," says an associate director of the ACLU.

Of course, many districts have many arguments favoring corporal punishment, and at the top of the list is the in loco parentis concept. But an important question can be asked: What if the teacher does believe in striking the child, but the parent does not? If this is the case, then is that teacher going beyond the role of the parent? It is not uncommon for the courts to rule in favor of a child who has been abused by his parents, let alone his teachers. In Marlar v. Bill case, the conclusion stated that the "teacher has no general right to chastize (sic) for all offenses, as has the parent. His right is restricted to the limits of his jurisdiction and responsibilities as a teacher. Also, the power to inflict punishment thus delegated to and vested in parents is little liable to abuse, being continually restrained

by natural affection, and the school teacher, of course, has no such natural restraint."

A basic question must be asked at this point in regards to corporal punishment: "Does the end justify the means?" There are other ways to motivate, correct misbehavior or instill learning besides physical brutality. The National Education Association realized this and a recent report by them recommends that "corporal punishment and infliction of bodily pain be phased out ... but does not, however, proscribe actions taken to restrain individuals or taken in self-defense or to protect other students (or teachers)." However, public apathy or condonement is too widespread. Thirteen states specifically allow it in their public schools, while only three, New Jersey, Maryland, and Massachusetts, ban it. It is a fact that the majority of the teachers and administrators regard physical punishment as an effective discipline action and agree that those who advocate its abolition are searching for some kind of utopia.

There are many educators who abhor striking a child for the purpose of inflicting pain, simply because an act was committed that was not liked. Some educators believe it is a violation of children's rights as well as a debasement of the primary goals of education. Many people in the field of child psychology and mental health agree. Its use shows publicly that a particular teacher, administrator or school cannot cope with its problems in a civilized way. They are demonstrating a "revolting manifestation of intellectual and professional bankruptcy," and are unable to meet the needs of their students rationally.

Corporal punishment is administered for a variety of reasons, but none of these seem to benefit the child. Conversely, they seem to hurt the child, not only physically of course, but in the other areas as well. Not only will this child show contempt for the teacher, but his interest in the subject could falter.

For many teachers, the job is an egotistical panorama, an opportunity to express authority. To have that authority threatened by a negative action on the part of a student, in whatever way, can come as a crushing blow to a figurehead, standing all alone in the front of the audience, that has somehow, suddenly, become biased against him. Action must be taken, even if it means something to instill permanently, like fear through physical abuse. This, to me, is the highest level of immaturity. Corporal punishment may be an effective means of control, but its educational value is practically nil.

The alternatives to this problem lie in common sense, preparation of lesson plans, a level attitude, a cultural sensitivity to innercity black children, and something which works very well, person-to-person, i.e., teacher/guidance-counselor-to-child conferences. I believe that more students will show more respect for a teacher who can eliminate a crisis with a conversation rather than with a hard right.

In the end, good discipline parallels good teaching. Teachers and administrators are supposed to be facilitators of learning, not the coercive

forces of facts. Part and parcel of their job is to help students to want to learn - not to punish them if they will not or cannot learn. As Mr. William Youngblood stated in the June 1973 issue of the Mississippi Law Journal, "... if petitioned to review the question again, the court must find the use of corporal punishment to be unlawful if justice is to be accorded to thousands of American school children."

Any kind of alternative to corporal punishment is desirable, but for these to work completely, the parents must recognize their responsibility and "assume their proper role." And when the process of discipline has become inherent in the child by the time of his entrance into the public schools, then the role of the public schools in regards to discipline can be realistically interpreted, assumed and applied in its proper context.

I firmly believe that education and discipline can have a laudable coexistence. One should not be pitted against the other. When the school administration, the teachers, the pupils, and the community recognize common goals and mutual interest in relevant education, discipline as an educational problem will be greatly reduced, and the next generation will be better prepared to revise national social and economic priorities.

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